

Insight Report: Myanmar

General elections 2020

October 2020



Myanmar Travel Security Risk Rating

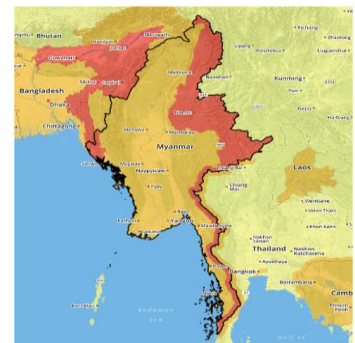


MEDIUM: Myanmar



HIGH: Insurgency-affected and other border areas (except Indian border)

Evacuation planning level: **PREPARATORY**



Key judgements

- The general elections will be held on 8 November, amid restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic following a resurgence in cases since mid-August. The Union Election Commission (UEC) has disregarded calls by opposition parties to postpone the polls and has instead announced that the elderly could take part in advance voting in COVID-19 hotspots, between 29 October and 5 November.
- While the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) is expected to secure the most votes, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) will remain the primary opposition. Ethnic-minority parties are also likely to win seats in their respective constituencies.
- The pandemic has significantly impacted the ability of political parties to conduct election campaigns in compliance with existing restrictions. Disruption from campaign events is likely to remain minimal. However, heightened security and localised traffic disruption can be expected on election day around polling booths.
- Incidents of political violence and associated clashes have been reported during the campaign period. Misinformation may also fuel communal tensions. Despite recent attempts by the government to initiate peace talks, fighting in conflict areas, particularly in Rakhine and Chin states, is expected to continue throughout and beyond the electoral process.
- Overall, Myanmar's security and operating environment is likely to remain stable, during and following the elections. This is primarily driven by the military's continued ownership of the country's security portfolio, including the armed forces, the police, border control and the Ministry of Home Affairs.
- Organisations operating in Myanmar should identify and closely monitor reliable sources of information to remain abreast of any changes in the security environment. Business continuity plans should be reviewed, and in-country staff should be briefed about all prevailing threats associated with the election.

Overview

The 8 November general elections will be the country's second since the end of military rule in 2011. More than 90 political parties are competing for regional and national seats, including the incumbent NLD and its main opposition, the military-backed USDP. Various ethnic-based regional parties will also be competing for seats in ethnic-minority states. Several newly created parties will compete for seats in central and southern areas.

The NLD won by a landslide in 2015 in both houses of the Assembly of the Union (locally known as Hluttaw). Led by long-time democracy advocate and public figure Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD contested the previous elections on three broad-based promises: economic growth, constitutional reform and ethnic-conflict resolution. The party is perceived to have fallen short on all three.

Furthermore, the NLD government has failed to deliver constitutional amendments. In January 2020, only four minor constitutional amendments of the 114 suggested by an NLD-led parliamentary committee were approved in the Hluttaw. Crucially, the constitutional provision for the military to automatically be granted 25% of seats within the Hluttaw will remain in place after the 2020 elections. The military will also keep its constitutionally mandated control over significant security portfolios, including the armed forces, the police, border control and the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Progress on resolving ethnic conflict in the country has also stalled in recent years. Fighting between ethnic insurgent groups and the security forces has remained constant since 2015, with intermittent spikes of increased violence over the years. Such fighting has primarily taken place in the western states of Rakhine and Chin, in northern Shan state that borders China, and in the eastern state of Kayah. The so-called '21st Century Panglong peace talks' in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2020 have also failed to significantly curb fighting in these areas.

In light of unmet expectations and perceived poor governance by the NLD, previously allied factions, such as some ethnic minority parties, will compete independently against the NLD in the forthcoming election. As such, the NLD is unlikely to enjoy the same level of support it received in the 2015 polls.

Electoral facts and figures

- More than 37m eligible voters in 2020.
- More than 90 political parties contesting.
- The Hluttaw, the national bicameral parliament, comprises 1,171 national, regional and state seats.
- 75% of the Hluttaw will be contested, with the remainder reserved for the military.
- The NLD currently holds 255 seats in the 440-seat lower-house (Pyithu Hluttaw), and 135 seats in the 224-seat upper-house (Amyotha Hluttaw).
- The USDP holds 30 lower-house and 11 upper-house seats. The remaining seats in both houses are held by ethnic-minority parties.

An election under COVID-19

Electoral campaigning, which is ongoing until 6 November, has been impacted by the reimposition of COVID-19 measures. Following a spike in cases in August in Rakhine and, subsequently, Yangon region, COVID-19 restrictions were imposed in these areas. These restrictions have since been extended to the rest of Myanmar. Measures limiting domestic travel and public gatherings, as well as area-specific stay-home notices and curfews, remain in place either until 31 October or until further notice. Schools and

offices of non-essential businesses have also been closed. Restrictions may be imposed or extended at short notice, should the pandemic situation deteriorate further.

This second wave of COVID-19 cases has elicited serious concerns among the opposition over the ability of the authorities to manage the situation. Opposition parties such as the USDP have criticised the NLD for what it regards as its delayed and inadequate handling of the pandemic. Meanwhile, in an isolated incident, some students in Sittwe (Rakhine) were arrested on 3 September following a protest questioning the state authorities' response to the situation. In addition, doubts have arisen over the prospect of campaigning and voting in line with existing COVID-19-related measures. The USDP, among other parties, has called for postponing the vote. However, the UEC rejected this in mid-September and publicly displayed voter lists on 2 October.

Despite stay-home orders and government regulations restricting attendance at campaign events to 50 people, the NLD and USDP, among others, have struggled to limit turnouts. On 21 October, thousands defied current restrictions to attend a rally in support of the Arakan National Party (ANP) in Toungup township (Rakhine). Earlier, on 5 October, a rally by ethnic-Kayah parties drew as many as 20,000 supporters. Large gatherings have also been reported in the adjacent regions of Mandalay and Sagaing, as well as Bago region, near Yangon.

Physical campaign events in Myanmar generally occur in public spaces such as parks, fields, stadiums and convention centres in main urban centres, such as the commercial capital Yangon (Yangon) and Mandalay (Mandalay). In smaller towns, these events are also held in central public areas. Any public events are liable to cause localised traffic disruption. In the unlikely event that restrictions on gatherings are relaxed, large rallies would be held in confined spaces such as stadiums, convention halls and parks.

However, given existing restrictions, most campaigning is being conducted via social media and state broadcasts. Some parties have accused the authorities of censoring any criticism of the NLD or mention of sensitive topics in broadcast campaign speeches. Moreover, journalistic activities have been deemed non-essential. Only state media can report on the pandemic and the elections.

Outlook

The remainder of the election period is expected to pass off without major incident, despite reports of isolated incidents of political violence in highly contested areas such as the central regions. The COVID-19 outbreak and associated restrictions will also curb the potential for election-related unrest or violence in major urban centres. However, fighting can be expected to continue in active conflict zones, including Rakhine and Chin.

Political violence

Political violence during elections is relatively uncommon in Myanmar. Nonetheless, local media outlet *The Irrawaddy* has reported that incidents of political violence since campaigning started on 8 September have already surpassed those in 2015. This can be attributed to fierce competition in this year's polls, as several pro-democracy splinter parties will be running against the NLD for the central and southern regions' ethnic-Bamar vote.

Violence could be in the form of isolated attempts by gangs associated with political parties to physically harass rival supporters. Knife attacks or similar violent incidents remain possible, particularly in low-income areas of urban centres, as well as heavily contested locations in rural areas and ethnic-minority states.

Increased animosity towards the NLD and acts of vandalism targeting its posters in the early stages of the campaign period suggest that ruling-party events and supporters may be more vulnerable to attack. A man wearing an NLD shirt was fatally injured during a brawl between NLD and USDP supporters in Kanbalu township (Sagaing region) on 24 October. Earlier, on 3 October, an NLD local committee member in Myaing township (Magwe region) was injured when an angry mob of around 100 people stormed his house. Earlier, on 20 September, 300 USDP campaigners reportedly threw stones at the home of an NLD supporter in Meiktila township (Mandalay), a USDP stronghold.

Violence is liable to occur around political gatherings, political party offices and polling booths, and may affect bystanders. Nonetheless, targeted attacks may decrease in frequency in light of ongoing restrictions and associated increased policing. More than 5,000 special police units will be deployed on election day in Yangon alone, where around 5,600 polling stations will be located. Furthermore, the authorities plan to deploy at least one security officer per polling station nationwide.

Communal tensions

Pervasive underlying communal tensions may also come to the fore during the election period. Long-running antagonism between an ethnic-Buddhist majority and a minority Muslim population tend to increase during election cycles. This will be exacerbated by the disqualification of some ethnic-Rohingya and other Muslims from candidate lists. Inflammatory political rhetoric blaming the recent surge in COVID-19 cases on the Rohingya community will further fuel tensions.

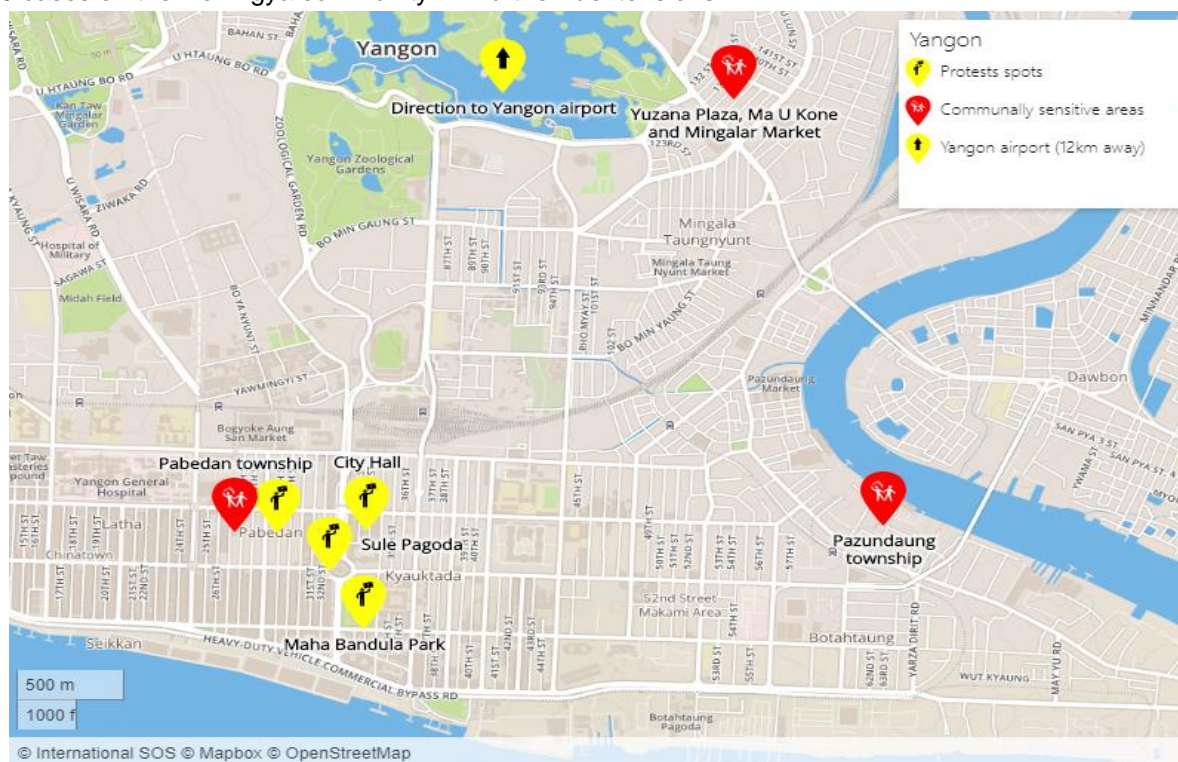


Figure 1. Common protest spots and communally sensitive areas in Yangon

While communal violence is more likely to occur – and to escalate sporadically – in ethnic-minority regions such as Rakhine, isolated incidents in urban centres remain possible (*see map above for hotspots in Yangon*). These usually occur in low-income areas and are unlikely to pose a direct threat to staff in urban centres.

Terrorism

While often underestimated, terrorism remains a persistent threat in the country. Some politically motivated acts of terrorism may occur in the current political climate. Any attacks would target government and military personnel and infrastructure, posing incidental risks to bystanders. Large-scale attacks in urban centres are unlikely but cannot be dismissed.

Following the UEC's announcement on the unlikely postponement of elections, two undetonated grenades were successively found at a UEC official's residence in the capital Naypyitaw on 19 and 20 September. This is an unprecedented incident – the motives and perpetrators of which are still being investigated – that local journalists perceive as an attempt at intimidation.

Conflict areas

Clashes in conflict zones such as Chin, Kayin, Rakhine and Shan states are likely to continue in the lead-up to the polls. Fighting in insurgency-affected areas of northern and central Rakhine, as well as southern Chin, has intensified since the beginning of the year (for a detailed assessment of the conflict and our related recommendations, see our separate Insight Report published in October 2020: *Operating safely in areas hit by the Arakan Army insurgency*).

Insurgent attacks in conflict areas may be prompted by election-related developments, and would predominantly entail small bombings and shootings targeting security force personnel and installations, government offices and state symbols. On 14 October, the AA reportedly abducted three NLD candidates in Toungup township (Rakhine).

In addition, the UEC has cancelled voting in several townships across Bago region, Kachin, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan states, purportedly for security reasons. Some local parties are calling on the UEC to reconsider its decision, as no fighting has been reported in several of these areas. Similar cancellations occurred in 2015, in parts of the Wa Self-Administered Division in Shan, though no fighting was occurring there at the time. The recent cancellation may prompt some localised gatherings in the affected townships. In addition, curfews and further shutdowns of internet access may also be imposed closer to the election, in order to curb the risk of violence.

Election outcome: What to expect

The NLD is expected to receive the most votes and will likely form a government, despite an increase in the number of parties running against it. Nonetheless, opposition candidates in ethnic-minority states may gain seats in their respective regional parliaments. A resultant increase in stakeholders participating in Myanmar's fledgling democratic process may further stall progress on economic, constitutional and conflict issues.

While we expect that the election outcome will be broadly accepted, some defeated opposition parties and activist groups are still liable to reject the results. This may also be the case in some constituencies

experiencing fighting, as well as those with mixed ethnic populations. Perceived limitations on freedom of speech and of the press, on top of international observers' inability to observe polling, would raise questions regarding the polls' legitimacy. Associated bouts of unrest are possible in the event of accusations of electoral fraud. However, these are unlikely to cause significant or widespread disruption, given the security forces' ability to deploy personnel and regain control.

A highly contested election campaign may also exacerbate underlying ethnic and communal tensions, as such issues often figure in public rhetoric in the run-up to the polls. Fighting in conflict areas, particularly in Rakhine and Chin, can also be expected to continue. Sustained opposition to a dialogue between the military and insurgent groups will likely result in a continuation of clashes. In other ethnic-minority states, the ability of ethnic-minority parties to gain seats will likely shape the possibility of dialogue and temporary ceasefires following the election. Moreover, the cancellation of voting in Rakhine will further fuel discontent against the central government and justify insurgent attacks. Meanwhile, the military may use the recent kidnapping by the AA as grounds to conduct further military operations in insurgency-affected areas. Nonetheless, Myanmar's security and operational environment is expected to largely remain stable.

Triggers to monitor

While we are not anticipating a notable deterioration in the current environment, security managers should monitor the following developments for potential escalation, during and after the electoral period:

- Implementation of further stringent COVID-19-related measures: this would exacerbate the economic slowdown and may cause discontent.
- Increased rhetoric or reported incidents of harassment against ethnic minorities, particularly the Rohingya community, as part of the electoral campaign or the political narrative surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic: this could trigger communal violence mainly in ethnic-minority states.
- Increased gatherings and related unrest following the cancellation of voting across several townships nationwide: this could prompt further questions around the legitimacy of the electoral results and may lead to further protests and political violence after the elections.
- In conflict zones, such as Rakhine, the recent cancellation of voting may trigger further escalation in fighting between ethnic armed groups and the military.

Recommendations to security managers

- Ensure in-country staff are fully briefed on the prevailing security environment, as well as the risks associated with the election and COVID-19-related developments. They should exercise caution during the electoral period and keep abreast of developments and secondary implications, such as protests and political violence.
- Ensure staff follow all official directives, including curfew measures and COVID-19 restrictions. Such measures are liable to change at short notice.
- Ensure that employees have access to reliable sources of information, including local media and contacts, due to the potential for rumours and misinformation during periods of heightened political and communal tensions.
- Ensure any in-country movement is conducted after confirming that journeys are feasible, taking into account any logistical challenges and movement restrictions. This will be especially critical

on election day and the period immediately after, when additional restrictions may be imposed and celebratory gatherings may occur.

- Closely follow all post-election developments to remain abreast of any changes in the security environment. Review business continuity plans, and monitor potential local triggers for unrest and any sensitive dates. Keep a record of all in-country staff; establish plans with primary, alternative and emergency communications channels; and be ready to implement movement restrictions for in-country staff at short notice.
- Regularly review the circumstances that influence your staff's ability to stay in their location for an extended period. Ensure that they are prepared to stand fast in secure accommodation for at least one week, accounting for potential short-notice changes in COVID-19-related restrictions. Accommodation should be selected in locations situated away from potential flashpoints and stocked with enough essential supplies, including water, food, fuel, batteries, cash and medicine. Map key flashpoint areas around your offices.
- Defer all travel to Rakhine's HIGH risk northern townships – Buthidaung, Kyauktaw, Maungdaw, Ponnagyun and Rathedaung – and Chin's Paletwa township due to regular fighting between the military and insurgents, as well as associated security operations.
- Essential travel can continue to other HIGH risk townships of Rakhine – Minbya, Mrauk-U, Myebon and Pauktaw – with awareness of intermittent clashes between the military and insurgent groups. Any essential travel should be undertaken with local support, heightened alertness and in compliance with all official directives, as entry restrictions and curfews may be imposed following security incidents.

Contributors



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